



Public Interaction Plan For the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program March 1998

Region 2

The Mexican wolf recovery program reintroduces a large native predator to historic range from which it was intentionally removed. Wolves were eradicated because of conflicts between wolf presence and human use of resources – primarily livestock depredation and utilization of native prey by Mexican wolves. Viable populations of Mexican wolves were gone from the United States by the mid-1900s. Mexican wolves are the most endangered subspecies of gray wolf in North America, with all known surviving animals in captivity prior to reintroduction.

Changes in human attitudes, scientific knowledge, and legislation, such as the Endangered Species Act, have resulted in efforts to restore wolf populations to various portions of historic range in the United States. In 1997, after completion of an Environmental Impact Statement, the U.S. Department of the Interior approved a plan to reintroduce Mexican wolves to historic range in Arizona and New Mexico. The first releases are scheduled for the spring of 1998.

Wolf restoration remains controversial. Although public opinion polls show that the majority of individuals support wolf recovery, the proportion of urban-dwelling individuals who support wolf recovery is often much higher compared to rural areas. Many people in rural communities in which wolves are to be restored do not support, or strongly oppose, reintroduction.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (the Service) and cooperators in the Mexican wolf recovery program are committed to an open dialogue with all parties interested in Mexican wolf recovery.

As one component of our effort to develop an effective public interaction program, the Service undertook a public interaction needs assessment in May 1996. The purpose was to solicit ideas and suggestions from the public about tools and approaches that the Service and cooperating agencies could use to implement an effective public interaction plan for the wolf reintroduction program. Individuals representing a broad spectrum of interests, primarily within local communities, were interviewed by an independent public interaction specialist. The following issues were identified as being of concern to local people.

Wolf Management Issues

- Inability to predict behavior of released wolves.
- Livestock depredation.
- Potential depredation on existing wildlife and domestic animals other than livestock.

Program Management Issues

- Responsiveness and/or reliability of Service information.
- How problem wolves will be managed.
- Who will monitor the Service (as the program moves forward).
- Relations and effective coordination between the Service and other agencies.

Information Needs and Dissemination

- Timely information on the status and locations of wolves, and depredation incidents.
- Identification of long-term goals and prospects of the reintroduction program.
- Direct mailing of regular updates was identified as a preferred method of receiving information.
- Public meetings were not identified as a preferred method of communication; however, forums for two-way communication, either one-on-one or in interactive workshops, and presentations to targeted audiences were suggested as effective ways to share information and concerns.
- Locally-based agencies were identified as important outlets to distribute current information about the program.

Interactions with Local Communities

- Agency staff living in local communities.
- Positive and effective relationships between agencies.
- Partnerships with local business and private organizations.

In July 1997, cooperating agencies met to discuss the findings of the needs assessment and other sources of input from the public. A draft summary with an invitation for comment was circulated to about 3,000 individuals on the Mexican wolf mailing list in December 1997. The following public interaction plan reflects the principles, goals, and objectives of the Mexican wolf recovery program. It also represents the information gained from the public interaction needs assessment, public comments on the draft summary of the public interaction plan, and conversations with interested parties.

Goal of the Public Interaction Program

To implement a program for public interaction that provides for open, timely, and effective two-way communication between the Mexican wolf recovery program and the public in a cost-efficient manner, and that builds tolerance, trust, and where possible, support with affected parties.

Objectives

1	Understand the information needs of key stakeholders and local communities, and be prepared to provide people with the information they need in a timely manner.
2	Establish and maintain an ongoing and credible line of communication with stakeholders to ensure that the Service is aware of current and emerging concerns.
3	Listen and respond to citizen concerns about wolf recovery in a credible and timely manner.

4	Establish an effective and accessible local presence in the affected community.
5	Establish a program of public interactions that encourages interested parties to actively participate in our program where possible and appropriate. Incorporate suggested changes and program improvements when possible, and provide feedback to the interested public.
6	Establish a process of communication, coordination, and cooperation with state, federal, local, and tribal government agencies that fosters the best possible working relations among the agencies involved in or affected by wolf recovery.

Specific Actions

Objectives	Action Description
1,2,3,6	An interagency management advisory group (IMAG) with representatives from affected federal and state agencies, tribes, and local governments has been established. The purposes of the group include improving interagency cooperation and communication, developing and reviewing annual wolf management plans, conducting project evaluations, and advising the Service's Mexican wolf recovery leader on issues and concerns related to wolf reintroduction.
3,4,6	An interagency field team (IFT), composed of biologists from the Service, Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD), and USDA Wildlife Services, has been established to implement the wolf reintroduction effort. Other state and tribal biologists may be added to this team as necessary.
4	A Mexican Wolf Field Office has been established in Alpine, Arizona. Full-time field personnel are living in the local communities.
1,2,3	A toll-free telephone line has been established for the following purpose: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Allow callers to leave a recorded message to report, as required under the experimental population rule, if they kill, injure, or harass a wolf, or if they want to report a "problem" wolf or depredation. Callers will be assured that they will receive a return call within 24 hours during the work week, or within 72 hours over weekends and holidays. The number is 1-888-459-WOLF (9653). Emergency backup numbers to contact agency personnel are provided.
1,2,3,4,5	Project staff are available to work with local organizations to provide issue-related presentations, workshops, and other appropriate public forums regarding wolf recovery.
5	Volunteers from nongovernment organizations, educational institutions, and local communities have been trained to assist in providing wolf husbandry care for wolves in acclimation pens.

1	Current information materials have been developed, and disseminated to locally-based AGFD, U.S. Forest Service, and County government offices. Updated information will continue to be made available through these offices and other convenient locations.
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Specific Products

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1,6	The Project Update will be issued regularly (approximately 6 times annually) to the Mexican wolf mailing list. The Project Update will reflect input from all cooperating agencies in the Mexican wolf reintroduction project. It will include current information about the status of wolves within the recovery area and depredations.
2,3,5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Space will be provided in the project update for a citizen column, entitled "life in Wolf Country." The column will be a forum for ideas, opinions, and experiences of interested citizens.
1,4	A brief field update (revised as new information is available) will be regularly posted at local community centers, such as post offices, Forest Service offices, etc., in Alpine, Springerville, Clifton, and other communities within the wolf recovery area.
1,2,5	<p>Two information brochures will be developed and distributed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Mexican Wolf Reintroduction (with basic biology, identification guide, human and pet safety issues, agency contacts and telephone numbers, etc.). ● "Ranching in Wolf Country." Agencies will seek to cooperate with organizations, such as Cattle Growers' Associations and County Extension Services, to develop a brochure that addresses livestock depredation, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● tips on reducing the likelihood of depredation; ● what's legal and what's not; ● how to apply for a wolf control permit on public lands; and ● how to apply to the Defenders of Wildlife Depredation Compensation fund.
1	Current information materials, including the Project Update and field updates, are now maintained on the Service's Mexican Wolf Web site (http://ifw2es.fws.gov/MexicanWolf). The site is being linked with other appropriate government and nongovernment web sites.
1,2	Press releases regarding significant program actions and results are distributed to regional and local media, and contacts are maintained with key media representatives.

1	Annual reports on the progress of the program will be made available to the public through the web site, libraries, and by request.
5,6	Cooperators will work to create a symbol or logo to give the program a distinct identity.

This plan is intended to be fluid and capable of responding quickly to changing needs and emerging concerns. Additional actions may be initiated and products developed at any time as specific needs are identified through communication avenues established under this plan. It will be reviewed and revised at least annually. Public input will be sought by attaching the current plan to the Project Update at the time of the annual review and asking for comments and suggestions for changes to the plan.